THE REALITY OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

A Teaching from Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo

Many times people come to me who have no commitment to the Buddhist path. Some of these are affiliated with another religion or philosophy while many have no particular path but follow a spiritual practice based on their readings and studies of various teachers from traditional spiritual systems as well as from those who have invented their own. Regardless of background, they come to hear Buddhist teachings in order to study, observe, and perhaps get a taste for experiencing what is offered in this temple. I frequently encourage this activity because I feel that it can be very useful for anyone to study the Teachings and perhaps even use certain Buddhist practices. Primarily, however, the Teachings can be greatly beneficial since they are logical, reasonable and highly applicable to one's living patterns. From my own experience, I feel that Buddhist philosophy is especially useful in this way. Through its logic, it makes sense out of chaos. In its reasonableness, it is useful at whatever level of acceptance one wishes. Because the Buddha taught many different levels and means of practicing and realizing the Teachings, anyone can be influenced by some element and apply that to daily life.

One of the most fruitful parts of the Teaching is the fruit of the accumulation of Buddha's knowledge about ordinary experience. His capability is not limited to the awareness of Absolute Nature alone, profound as that is. Along with that realization, he has complete knowledge of relative existence, that is, of all cause and effect relationships. Because of this wisdom and knowledge, he was able to give very precise and precious teachings about the interdependence of cause and effect and the arising of karmic conditions which affect everyone constantly.

Here is something we can all use. Many spiritual philosophies and systems give different kinds of teachings. Some offer devotion to a deity. Some offer prayers and practices to realize a goal. But very few emphasize cause and effect as strongly. Of those who do teach cause and effect, Buddhist Teaching is unique in teaching precise details concerning which action will produce which type of result.

The Buddha taught clearly that all conditions arise from a cause and that this cause is precise. Just as an apple seed will not sprout as a grape vine or a pear tree but only as that particular type of apple, so karmic consequences of our previous thought, words and deeds ripen in a precise way. From this thought arises a great river of benefit in that we can understand ourselves not as victims of
circumstances to which we have no connection but can take direct responsibility for our current and future conditions. Buddha did not simply say, This is your karma; he also taught specific antidotes to every possible type of suffering. If we can increase the activities which bring benefit as well as purify unripened seeds of future adversity, we are no longer victims.

Whether or not one is a Buddhist, this teaching can be easily applied to one's life. I have had acquaintance with students who said they have tried kindness and compassionate activity but didn't get much benefit. Or they say they have done some rather negative things but haven't seen any particularly bad consequences from it. Both statements are possible only because we human beings have the capacity to see only a very limited piece of time - one lifetime at the most. Even within this life, many people can effectively block out large portions of that, limiting and distorting their view even further. However, if we rely on Buddha's enlightenment and utilize his ability to see into the unknowable past and unforeseen future, we learn the consequences of actions and thoughts that often take long periods of time to ripen. The fact is, they sometimes ripen quickly, sometimes slowly, but they always ripen surely.

In either case, it is only reasonable to include in one's daily routine those activities which will ultimately bring good results such as alleviating one's own suffering as well as that of others. It also makes sense to include those prayers and practices which will root out hatred, greed, ignorance, jealousy, pride and self-cherishing from the mindstream. By thinking that all the experiences we have, subjective or objective, arise from a cause which originates within our mind, solutions to problems take on whole new meanings and possibilities.

For instance, if it is difficult to have the diligence to meditate and practice daily, one might consider the antidote to begin with taking on some Dharma activity such as sponsoring a practitioner during retreat. In this way, one applies the opposite as an antidote to the inability to practice. If one is poor, one might engage in activities of generosity. This is a very different attitude from what we normally see, yet it can save us from the endless and fruitless struggles we have with and within ourselves. This internal fighting inevitably puts us into a blind corner, and we feel as though we are constantly swimming upstream. Of course, in the case of a lack of diligence, perseverance is also necessary. And in the case of poverty, improving one's work skills or actual job is also necessary. This is the way of the world. While we must respect it, we can never forget to apply the direct antidote to whatever problems plague us.

Buddha's teaching has an astounding assortment of antidotes and an amazing technology through which one can apply them to any particular cause of suffering. This technology is enormously beneficial in rooting out and pacifying even the deepest karmic seeds. Being precise and logical, they can be applied to one's daily life as well as in practice and meditation. The best thing about the Buddha's Teaching is simply that it works. We can have confidence in it because these methods did not arise from someone who did a lot of thinking and experiments or who wrote a lot of books and gave a lot of workshops. The Teaching comes from a Buddha, one who has realized the Enlightened Essence itself, one who is, as he said of himself, Awake.